Question forms in male first meetings: A quantitative study of cultural norms in Japanese and English conversations

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Abstract. This quantitative-analytical study compares question forms and functions in first conversations among non-acquaintances in 15 English conversations and 5 Japanese conversations. The English conversation data were videotaped in the United States, Australia, and the UK. The Japanese data were collected in Japan. The total length of the data is about 10 hours. All participants were male. The participants were instructed to conduct 30 minutes of first conversations with new acquaintances. Utterances with question forms and question functions that elicit new information from the asker were extracted and analyzed. Taking into account that Japanese and English have very different syntax, I compared question–answer patterns of both languages and examined the correlations between these syntactic–semantic categories of questions and the pragmatic types/functions of questions.

The results of the data analysis showed how Japanese and English speakers use different types of question forms and functions in first conversations. In the English data, participants were inclined to request for new information with open-ended questions, such as wh-questions. They also asked questions pertaining to information of the recipient. In the Japanese data, this form of questions occurred less frequently. They tended to ask about simple facts that are not related to the other participants. It was also found that they hesitated to ask personal information.

1. Introduction

Natural conversations consist of a combination of greetings, statements, questions, responses, answers, information, and other speech acts, which appear spontaneous and unplanned, but they form a single conversation. This paper focuses on question forms and functions that are found in male first conversations with new acquaintances. In conversation, participants claims knowledge, asserts knowledge, shares knowledge through turns-at-talk and sequences of interaction (Heritage: 2014, 343). As Ilie (2015) highlighted, “no real communication can take place without questions (1).” However, according to Shigemitsu (2015), it is found that Japanese people avoid asking questions in social conversation. Social conversation, in this paper, means that people spend some time together to “chit chat” for the purpose of creating and maintaining relationships. However, in some cultures, questions may create an uncomfortable atmosphere in the conversation; therefore, some of the participants avoided asking questions. This discourse-analytical study compares question forms and functions in first conversations between unacquainted people in 15 English conversations and 5 Japanese conversations. The English conversation data were videotaped in the United States, Australia, and the UK. The Japanese data were collected in Japan. The total length of the data is about 10 hours. All participants were male. The participants were instructed to conduct 30 minutes first conversations with new acquaintances. Utterances with question forms and question functions that elicit new information from the asker were extracted and analyzed. Taking into account that Japanese language has very different syntax to English, I compared Japanese and English question–answer patterns and examined the correlations between these syntactic–semantic categories of questions and the pragmatic types/functions of questions (Ilie 2015, Enfield 2010, Hayashi 2010, Tanaka 2015).

2. Questions

2.1 Definitions of questions

Questions are syntactically recognizable in both English and Japanese and constitute an important unit of utterances in conversation. According to Ilie (2015), Chomsky treated interrogative sentences as being derived from a commonly shared declarative counterpart as a founder of the generative-transformational grammar. In one of the more recent studies, Kasher (2010: 375) defined “question” as “a single speech act type,” which has “usually been taken to constitute attempts on the part of the speaker to get information of a certain kind from the addressees of the speech act.” In the Routledge Pragmatic Encyclopedia. Speech acts of asking are governed by the following rules:

(a) A speech act is performed by the speaker, as intended to be addressee.

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(b) The speech act counts as an attempt on the part of the speaker to get information from the addressee.

According to Kasher (2013), the preconditions of posing a sincere question are as follows:

(c) The speaker does not know the answer and is interested in knowing it.

(d) The speaker has a reason to assume the addressee of one's speech act knows the answer.

Kasher also revealed that a question in a certain language uses "certain features of the language, such as the interrogative grammatical form of the language, if it has one, or its interrogative intonation." He claimed that the answer to the question and the reaction to an answer that is not an answer can be recognized (p. 375).

Ilie (2015) highlighted that questions are envisaged desire to acquire knowledge and drive a conversation, and "no real communication can take place without questions (1)." "Questions are considered to be a powerful communication tool because they have a particularly strong illocutionary force because they 'compel' a response" (Goody, 1978). However, according to Tanaka, questions are difficult to define.

The question–answer sequence that concerns this paper is of the information-requesting type in the particular situation of first conversations with newly acquainted people.

We assume that a question has the following three aspects in this situation:

(a) Aspect of eliciting information: A prototype of the question role is to elicit information from other people.

(b) Aspect of continuing conversation: By asking a question, we can continue a conversation because they are adjacency pairs. A question generally requires another person to respond. Therefore, a question functions for the continuation of a conversation.

(c) Aspect of face work: A question also has an important role in politeness. The action of asking is controlled by a person's sociocultural background. As a Japanese participant said in a follow-up interview in Shigemitsu (2005), questions may invade the question recipient's territory of knowledge, which could be private. In that regard, it might be considered impolite. We can also show interest in the recipient by asking questions. The recipient may be happy to be asked a question. In this case, not asking a question may be considered impolite.

When asking a question, one of these aspects could be emphasized, or a combination of both or three of them could be possible. Therefore, for this paper, we devised the following research questions:

RQ1: Do English speakers ask more questions compared with Japanese speakers?

RQ2: Are there any differences of question types in English and Japanese?

RQ3: What types of questions do Japanese speakers try to avoid?

2.2 Questions as a socio-cultural norm

This paper compares types of questions between English and Japanese natural conversations. Logically, questions are used when the speaker seeks information and confirmation; however, what to ask and why they ask are controlled by socio-cultural norms of the language used. The fact that Japanese young students do not ask questions very often has been observed. The students' behaviors have been regarded as problematic in the classroom setting. However, it is assumed that they might have complied with the Japanese socio-cultural norms of behavior so much so that this so-called "laziness" in the classroom can happen. We also observe that even rational grown-up individuals do not ask questions in formal settings, such as in meetings or conferences. Even on social networking sites, such as Facebook, a typical comment is "I'm sorry." One of the reasons this expression can be found frequently demonstrates that asking of questions may not be an acceptable behavior. Even on social networking sites, such as Facebook, a typical comment starts from the expression of "I'm sorry" or its equivalent expression. Talking about "a good conversation," Japanese people generally are sensitive about questions. The questionnaire result in Shigemitsu et al. (2006) showed that in one comment from a Japanese participant, he reported always feeling uncomfortable when other participants ask many personal questions at a dinner table in an intercultural setting (p. 23) Several participants also claimed that asking detailed questions about personal opinions and ideas is viewed as an impolite behavior. The results of the interviews with each participant revealed that English speakers and Japanese speakers have very different perspectives concerning the appropriacy of asking questions. English speakers believe that the goal of a conversation is to acquire new information and knowledge from other participants. They also want to show their competence and intelligence in first meetings. On the other hand, Japanese speakers are inclined to be more considerate toward other participants' feelings.

In Shigemitsu's (2015), interview with 25 Japanese male subjects were conducted. The four of the Japanese interviewees says that they try not to ask questions. Some interviewees commented the reason for avoiding asking questions. An interviewee said that he knew generally that some people do not like to be questioned, whereas the other responded that he always do not ask questions in casual and social conversations even when he has something to clarify. Other two interviewees commented that they do not like to be questioned and they do not like conversation in which they are being asked questions (146–149). On

the other hand, English speakers want to show their intellectuality and competence: three Americans out of 11 and one Australian male out of 15 responded that they try to ask questions. No interviewee among the English speakers said that they do not like asking or being asked questions. Moreover, they like conversations that contain elements of disclosure of each other.

3 Methodology

3.1 Data

We analyzed mono-cultural data of English conversations that we had video-taped in the US, Australia, and the UK in 2011. Japanese conversations were recorded in Japan in 2009 and 2012. Each set of data contained 30-minute first time meetings of three male participants. After each conversation, a follow-up interview was conducted to each participant separately.

Table 1. The conversation data for analysis

Language	Place of data collection	Data code	Participant code
English	Oxford	UK27	B2, B4, B5
		UK29	B6, B8, B9
		UK30	B3, B8, B10
	Manchester	UK53	B15, B16, B17
	London	UK57	B21, B22, B23
	Texas	US31	U1, U2, U3
		US33	U3, U4, U6
		US36	U7, U8, U10
		US39	U8, U11, U12
		US40	U7, U9, U11
	Sydney	AU41	AU1, AU2, AU3
		AU42	AU3, AU4, AU5
		AU43	AU43, AU6, AU7
		AU47	AU5, AU12, AU13
		AU50	AU15, AU16, AU17
Japanese	Tokyo	JP17	J24, J25, J26
		JP68	J37, J42, J43
		JP71	J36, J37, J39
		JP72	J33, J38, J39
		JP73	J33, J35, J39

All the participants met the following criteria:

1. None of the participants had met each other previously. We assumed that the participants would try not to receive a negative evaluation from the other participants.
2. The participants were all men. We examined only men to eliminate gender variables, and because Japanese people who face problems in intercultural communication are generally male business individuals.
3. The participants were aged 22 and older. Most were PhD and MA students. We assumed that the participants of this age group would be socially and culturally mature and that their performance may have been influenced by their sociocultural background.
4. All the participants' ancestral background was checked, and they were not recent immigrants.
5. All the participants in the study signed a consent form stating that the researchers may use the recording data for academic purposes only and that it was not expected for the recording to be used in a manner that could cause personal identification.

Since this was a first encounter conversation, some features that are distinct from ordinary conversation were observed.

First, participants introduced themselves at the beginning of the conversation. Then, they began exchanging their background information, their likes and dislikes, and a report of facts and opinions that they think will interest their listeners. In the introductory conversation, participants tried to present their best personality and be polite to others. Since this exchange presents an opportunity for a long-term relationship, they aimed to succeed at relationship building. For that reason, the data tend to show an ideal conversation, as visualized by the participants.

3.2 Typology of question for the research

This study focuses on questions that elicit information of which the asker does not know or information to questions offered by the recipient that the asker needs to clarify. The following questions were selected for analysis.

1. A question is an utterance that requires some information or judgment of the proposition.
2. Utterances typically have syntactic and prosodic features.
3. Certain utterances that do not have syntactic and prosodic features were included when the utterance concerned B event (Labov & Fanshell, 1977).
4. Certain utterances that do not have syntactic and prosodic features were included when the asker mentioned that he lacked some information.
5. The following question forms were excluded for this research because they do not elicit information: directive use of questions, questions in quotations, questions as filler such as “What should I say?,” greetings with question forms such as “How is it going?,” phrases confirming a person’s understanding such as “Do you know what I mean?,” tag questions with falling intonations, and newsmarks without responses.

The categorization follows Enfield (2010), Hayashi (2010), and Adachi (1999). Each Japanese final particle has slightly different connotations; however, they are classified using the same categorization as in English.

The question forms for eliciting information were categorized into three: Yes/No questions, Wh-questions, and Others.

1) Yes/no questions: A polar question is a prototype of the questions. It is used to determine whether the proposition is true or false in the question form.
2) Wh-questions: A content question is the other prototype of questions, and is used to elicit information.
3) Others:
   a) Alternative questions: This is used for selecting a candidate answer. However, half of these forms are “A or something” type of alternative questions. It is regarded as a functionally content question.
   b) Questions for turn distribution: The main purpose of this question is to give a turn to the other participant, as in “What about you?”
   c) Disclaiming knowledge: Disclaiming knowledge informs the asker of a lack in knowledge. However, he or she does not insist on obtaining the answer from the other participants (e.g., “I’m not sure about that” or “I’m not familiar with that.”).
   d) Co-construction question: While a speaker is talking, sometimes the final part of his utterance is uttered by the other participant with rising intonation. The participant is guessing and asking about it.
   e) Question with “*do* (pronounce as in doe)” in Japanese: The word literary means “how,” but the required answer is not about the way of doing something. The whole story of an event is required. It typically means “Tell me about that” in a vague way.

The question forms for this research were summarized in the following tables (Table 2 for English data and Table 3 for Japanese data). Syntactically, question markers appear at sentence beginning in English but at sentence ending in Japanese.

Table 2. English question forms selected for this research. The asterisk * indicates the question forms that were used when the asker could guess the content of ongoing information and ask about it.

Closed Questions	Open-ended questions	
Polar Questions	Wh-Questions	Other content questions
Yes/No *affirmative Yes/No rising intonation *affirmative Yes/No falling intonation *negative Yes/No Q rising intonation *negative Yes/No Q falling intonation short Yes/No Q	What What kind Who When Where Which How How old How much/many How long How far How big Why How come short Q Wh	How about What about *Or Do you know Do you mean Do you think Indirect Q Un finished Tell me I don't know *co-constructive questions

A Japanese question has a very different syntactic construction from English question forms. Tanaka (2015) acknowledged the extreme complexity of Japanese questions with its many aspects, such as politeness and gender differences, formal–informal, and with or without shared knowledge, which are interwoven with the production of questions. The categorization below follows Tanaka (2015).

Table 3. Japanese question forms selected for this research. The asterisk * indicates the question forms that were used when the asker could guess the content of ongoing information and ask about it.

Polar Questions	Open ended questions	
Yes/No	Wh	others
desu ka **n desu ka* **wake desu ka* *masu ka/ mashita ka* *masu/ mashita/* with rising intonation (*)*no* with rising intonation *negative+*desu ka* *negative+*n desu ka* **yo ne* with rising intonation **desu ne* **desu ka ne* with rising intonation short question *short Q with negative final particle	Wh equivalent+*masu ka*/ Wh equivalent+*mashita ka* Wh equivalent +*desu ka* *wh equivalent+*n desu ka* *wh equivalent +*desu* rising intonation wh equivalent short Q with rising intonation	(*)unfinished *do+shite masu ka* *do+deshita ka* with rising intonation *do+desu ka* with rising intonation (*)*kanji desu ka* with rising intonation *do nan desu ka ne* *co-construction *wakarimasen* (I don't know) *ke* (I am in the position that I should know about it but I do not know/remember)

4 Data analysis and findings

Figure 1 shows the average number of eliciting information questions in each country group. It is found that Japanese use more questions compared with other three English-speaking country groups. The Japanese participants said that asking question is not a polite behavior and that they do not like to be questioned in conversations. However, in the conversations in the study, they asked more questions to each other.

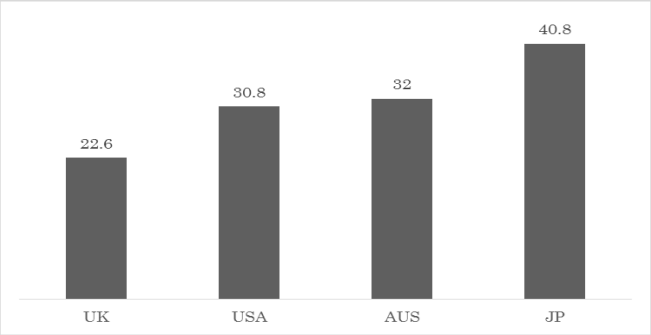

Figure 1. Average number of eliciting information questions in each country group.

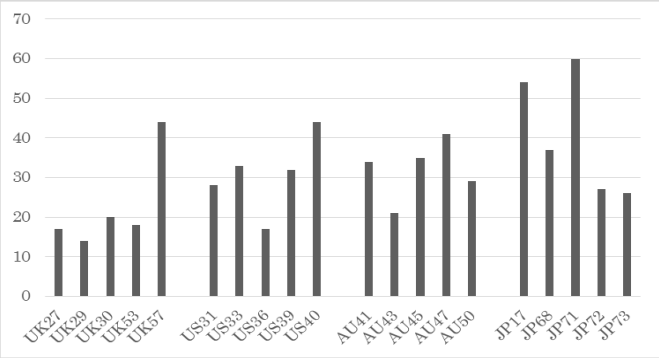

Figure 2. Total number of each group.

Figure 2 shows the number of the total eliciting information questions in each group. The number of question varies in each country group. Two of the Japanese group, JP17 and JP71 have the highest number, but they are not particular cases. The lowest group, JP73 had 27 questions, but that was 3 numbers less than the average (32) of all 20 groups.

Thus, it is found out that Japanese participants do not avoid asking questions in their first time meeting although they believe that asking question is an impolite behavior and that they do not like to be asked questions. Then, there may be accepted questions and unaccepted questions for Japanese participants.

Figure 3 shows which forms of questions are used in each country group.

Table 4. Forms of questions.

	UK	US	Aus	JPN
Yes/No	52	74	66	136
WH	46	69	68	34
Others	14	16	32	32
Total	112	159	166	202

Figure 3. Forms of questions.

Table 4 shows the number of question types. In order to provide an overview of the differences, the table shows three categories: Yes/No questions, Wh-questions, and Others. As for the categorization, see Tables 1 and 2. Figure 3 is the radar graph of Table 4. As you can see, data from the UK, the US, and Australia (dotted lines) show a similar pattern. On the contrary, Japanese shows a different pattern. The data demonstrate clearly that the English participants used Wh-questions more often compared with the Japanese data. The Japanese participants tended to rely more on Yes/No questions. As Ilie pointed out, Wh-questions are open-ended questions. The length and depth of an open-ended answer are subject to the question recipients. However, yes-no questions require closed yes-no answers. The question recipients can only respond “yes” or “no.” The question recipients do not need to feel overloaded compared with the answering open-ended questions.

First, wh-question forms were selected based on the topic. “What”-questions were most used, in both English conversations (UK 23, US 30, AUS 21 times) and Japanese (13 times) in total. Second the most used wh-questions by the English participants were “where”-questions (UK 5, US 10, AUS 11 times), whereas the Japanese participants only used “where”-questions 3 times. The English participants also used “how”-questions (UK 7, US 7, AUS 9 times), whereas the Japanese participants hardly used “how”-questions (2 times). It is said that the use of wh-questions help the question recipients disclose himself more as well as demonstrate the asker’s interest towards the recipients.

Finally, let us show the topic of the participants’ questions in the conversation data. The questions were divided into two categories: question about the participant (private) or question not about the participant (public). For example, a private question is “So what do you do there?” (Excerpt from AUS41), and a public question is “Is it audio material or what is it?” (Excerpt from US31). Questions with the subject “you” or “your” were included as private questions. In the Japanese data, private questions or public questions are distinct from the content and topic in the question due to syntactical differences. The results are shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4 shows the relation between public/private questions and their forms (Yes/No-questions, Wh-questions, and other question forms). The English participants asked more private questions to the question recipient although the graph shapes vary. On the other hand, the Japanese graph shows that public questions were asked more often than the private questions.

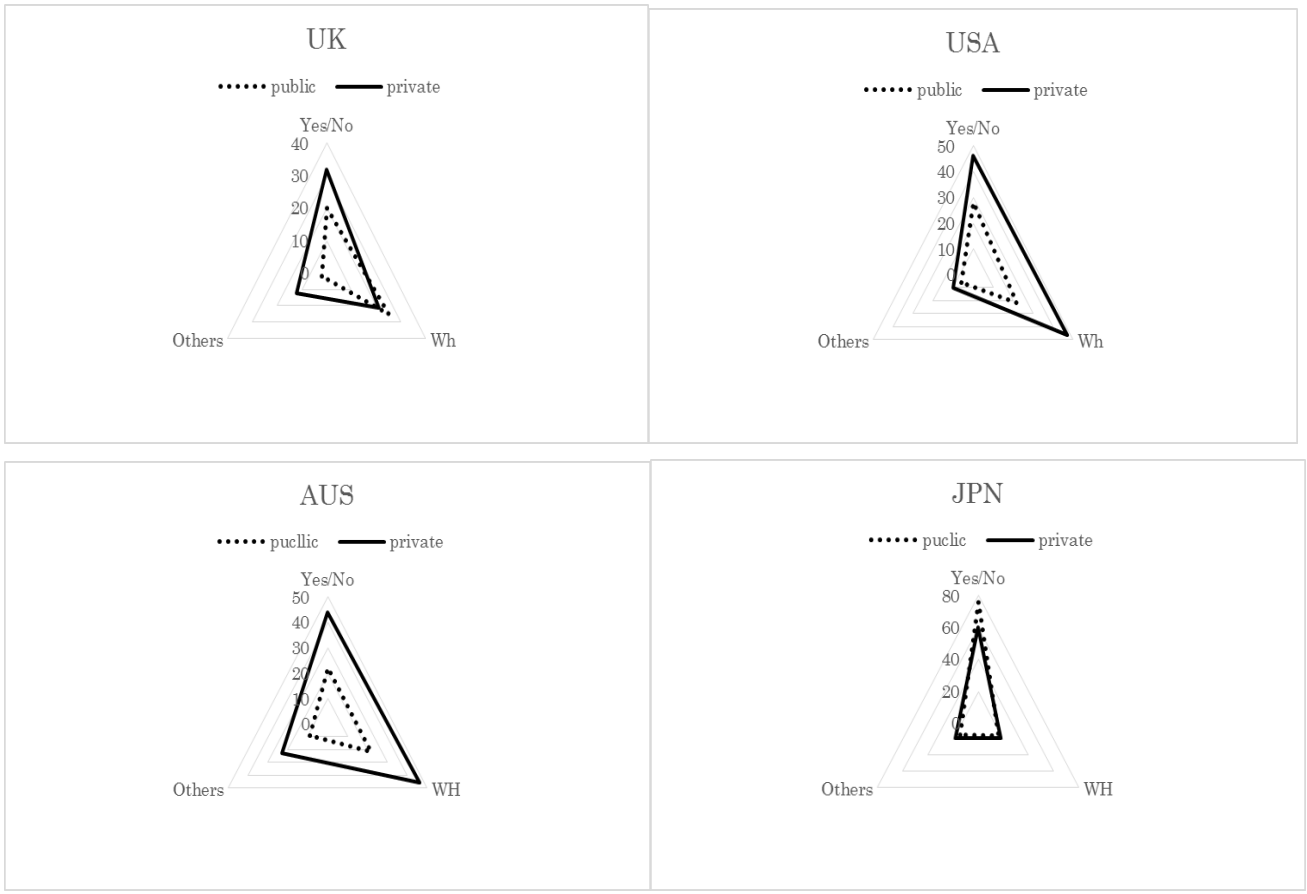

Figure 4. Question forms and private/public questions.

The following excerpt shows how a Japanese participant hesitated to ask about a private matter or for confirmation of recipients' understanding of his idea. In this excerpt, J43, a technology major student, was asking two other participants, a linguistic major and a language communication major, about the reason why they wanted to study linguistics and communication. J43's real question appears in line 20 "what motivates you to conduct research?" However, we could see a long pre-sequence and J43' hesitation prior to the question in line 20. He stated his field of study. Then, he said "I don't mean it. I am not insulting you" (line 8). After that, he gave some examples related his field, technology. Then he added, "I am afraid this might be very impolite." After asking the question "what motivates you to do your current research," he said that he was asking because of trivial curiosity.

[Excerpt from JP72](Translation: The original was in Japanese)

1 J43：Well, it's about application, how to use your research result, I am talking about. Well, this is my third
2 conversation recording today. I major in technology. I found that the other participants study communication
3 s and so on
4 J38：[@@1]
5 J43：[linguistics1] something like that they always talked about that
6 J38： [yeah 2］
7 J33： ［yes 2］
8 J43：<u>well uh I don't mean it, I am not insulting you</u>
9 J33：yeah
10 J43：just from my curiosity. Well, what should I say? In the field of technology
11 J38：Yeah
12 J43：when you'll discover this, then you'll improve this part, you'll make new technology or something, very very
13 direct [toward1］
14 J33：［yeah、yeah direct 1］

15 J43：direct, we have merit or something, we know what this experiment will be useful for, but
16 J38：yes
17 J43：yeah, well, what should I say, I am afraid this might sound very impolite, are you really enjoying your research?
18 I don't understand.
19 J33：yes
20 J43：for that, what should I say, what motivates you to do your current research?
21 J33：mm
22 J38：yeah yeah
23 J43：I have been feeling so during the conversation recording today
24 J33：yes
25 J38：yes
26 J33：［well 1］
27 J43：［for example, as for communication 1］ I cannot see why and how you are studying it
28 J38： yes
29 J43：In which part of the world would they apply the research result? I have a feeling why you do so.
30 J38：yes
31 J43：Just from my curiosity [though1］
32 J38：［yes 1］ That's a kind of an important question, I think, well, ［then 2］
33 J33：［yes 2］
34 J38：It depends on the researcher. It is a philosophy, isn't it?
35 J43：Ah, yes
36 J38：So, the answers will vary I, well, I study communication. It is a study of communication. However, for example,
37 linguists may answer differently, I suppose. They try to answer what is language [that kind of question1］
38 J43：［yes、yes yes 1］
39 J38：people, some people study linguistics, some psychologists study language too, ［don't they? 2］
40 J43：［yes yes 2］
(the latter part is omitted)

5 Conclusion

This paper compares question forms and functions in first conversations between unacquainted people in 15 English conversations and 5 Japanese conversations. The English conversation data were videotaped in the US, Australia, and the UK. The Japanese data were collected in Japan. The total length of the data was about 10 hours. All the participants were male. The participants were instructed to conduct 30-minute first conversations with new acquaintances. Utterances with question forms and question functions that elicit new information from the asker were extracted and analyzed.

From the analysis, the followings were observed: 1) There is no conclusive result to show that English speakers ask more questions and Japanese speakers avoid asking question. Rather, Japanese participants asked questions more often than English speakers. 2) English speakers used wh-questions as well as yes/no questions, whereas Japanese speakers used more yes/no questions than wh-questions (one-third). 3) English speakers asked more about personal information pertaining to the question recipient than other topics. The wh-questions used were meant to elicit personal information disclosure by the question recipient. On the other hand, Japanese speakers preferred to ask about topics that are not related directly to the question recipient. In particular, they seldom used wh-questions to ask about private matters.

As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, Japanese participants felt that asking a question in an ordinary conversation is impolite. It is said that the questions they try to avoid are wh-questions and questions about topics that are private to the question recipient. When the Japanese participants asked about a private matter or when they used open-ended questions, they would usually show hesitation to ask and apologize subsequently for asking the question.

This paper analyzes questions from a quantitative viewpoint. Future research needs to analyze the use of questions qualitatively. The question forms and functions are complex, and some of these forms are combined for mitigation. According to Heritage (2003), "[a] question simultaneously, albeit subliminally, projects knowledge, identity and power.

Participants have a lively real-time prospective orientation to the social distribution of knowledge in interaction." Discourse-analytic research will need to clarify the functions of question-answer sequences. Furthermore, the topic might influence which questions to use. Future research should also establish how rapid-fire questioning works as well as the type of responses generated by such questioning technique. It will be significant to investigate, from the adjacency pair preference, whether question recipients would hesitate to answer or not. Furthermore, another concept that should be examined from epistemic viewpoints.

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